

As I have grown older, I have become increasingly conscious of just how great a privilege it is to be able to celebrate Mass on a regular basis with a community of fellow believers. As strong as my conviction about this is, however, I find it difficult to put into words the subjective experience we can have in participating in the celebration and how that experience moulds and forms us as persons of faith.

When I think about the Mass, what springs immediately to my mind is the Eucharistic prayer. It begins with the invitation of the priest to those present to lift up their hearts and to give thanks to God, and comes to a climax in the final doxology or giving of glory and honour to the Father, in, with and through Christ in the unity of the Spirit. The “Amen” with which we respond to the doxology embraces the whole prayer and affirms the desire of those who say Amen to make the prayer their own.

Prayer, as we all experience at some point or other is not always easy. At such times, we tend to use words like dryness or emptiness, darkness or night. We find ourselves reduced to stuttering and even, at times, to silence.

To recite or to listen to the words of the Eucharistic prayer and, in doing so, to enter into the movement of worship and praise of which they speak, is to find

oneself drawn beyond the darkness to what is, at the very least, a promise of dawn.

In a simpler world than ours, a world in which people lived in closer proximity to the land and to nature in general, God seemed more present to the world and to people than he does to us. Because our world tends to be dominated by science and technology, what we directly encounter in it is less the work of the creator God and more the result of human creativity and ingenuity. We live to a large degree in a human made world.

I was struck recently by a phrase I came across in a novel I was reading. "If human nature were not a mystery," it said, "we would have no need of poets." The phrase reminded me of a basic conviction of the German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner. What makes us humans, Rahner argues, is our sense of mystery, our openness to what he calls the Holy Mystery. He speaks of the human being as "spirit in the world." The word spirit, here, points to that capacity in us to reach out beyond all the individual events and actions that make up our lives to that infinite and incomprehensible mystery that surrounds, grounds and permeates us and all that is and which religious people call God. In Jesus, the mystery reveals itself to us as a mystery of self-communicating love.

The night that many experience in prayer is for them a condition for entering into the mystery. What the Eucharistic prayer offers us is something like a road map. It teaches us how to pray at the very time that we seem incapable of prayer. It assures us that in spite of our feelings, our prayers are penetrating the darkness that surrounds us.

The Greek word from which our word Eucharist comes means thanksgiving. In the Eucharistic prayer, we not only offer God worship and praise, we also thank him for all that he has done for us and for the world beginning with the gift of life itself. The gift, however, for which we offer thanks in the Mass, is the life, teaching and destiny of Jesus. As many sided as that gift is, what I find most consoling about it is that in Jesus we are able to discern the human face of God. Just as we are on the verge of being overcome by the mystery, God reveals himself and his intention for our lives in a humanly understandable way. Although Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, he is also, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, a human being like us in all things but sin.

At the heart of the Eucharistic prayer is an act of remembering. At the Last Supper, after identifying with himself the bread and wine he was about to share with his disciples, Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me." As we stand before the

infinite mystery of God, we are invited to remember not only what Jesus did at the Last Supper, but also the death and resurrection to which he was pointing, as well as the whole of his life, which led to and gave meaning to that moment.

Memory is an extraordinary gift. It is a key to our sense of who and what we are. As memory disappears, so too does our sense of identity. The same is true when it comes to our spiritual life. In saying, "Do this in memory of me," Jesus is asking us not to forget him and above all what God has done for us in him. To forget that is ultimately to forget who we are and who we are called to be.

The Eucharistic celebration comes to a climax at communion. The bread that is broken and shared and that we receive as pure gift brings home to us the primacy of grace. God is revealed in the life of Jesus and in every Eucharistic celebration as a God of grace, a mystery of self-giving love. Jesus gives himself to us so that we might give ourselves to him and, in him, to one another. The deeper our union with him becomes, the more will our prayer be caught up in his prayer. He prayed throughout his ministry and most movingly in the garden of Gethsemane. Luke's account of the death of Jesus includes a prayer that, for me, both sums up his prayer and offers us a model of how we might pray, especially in times of darkness. "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."